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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001934

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2014

TAGS: [KWBG](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [IS](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#)

SUBJECT: ISRAELI OFFICIALS DISCUSS GAZA DISENGAGEMENT,
YASSIN KILLING WITH USD ZAKHEIM

REF: A. TEL AVIV 1742

[1](#)B. TEL AVIV 1741

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In meetings that took place in the hours following the Sheikh Yassin assassination, USD Dov Zakheim discussed the targeted killing and Gaza disengagement with Ministers Olmert and Mofaz and MKs Steinetz and Sneh. (Selected GOI comments from these meetings reported reftels.) Mofaz defended Yassin's killing, and said the GOI would continue such operations. Sneh blasted the operation, which he characterized as typical GOI undermining of Palestinian moderates. Mofaz and Olmert both focused on the issue of U.S. support for the disengagement plan, with Olmert predicting that President Bush would privately hint to Sharon that support would come after the U.S. election. Sneh urged the U.S. to withhold its support until Sharon took a number of steps, including on settlements and outposts in the West Bank. Steinetz said Sharon would have to refrain from any West Bank withdrawals if he hopes to win the support of Steinetz and other key Likud members. Olmert suggested that Netanyahu and Shalom would back the PM. Mofaz thought withdrawal would begin around the end of the year and continue until summer, 2005. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Visiting Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim discussed Gaza disengagement and the Yassin assassination in a series of meetings March 22 with Alternate Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman Yuval Steinetz and Labor MK Ephraim Sneh. The Ambassador and/or emboffs accompanied Zakheim to the meetings. (Selected GOI comments from these meetings reported reftels.)

Yassin Assassination

[1](#)3. (C) The meetings all took place the morning of Israel's targeted killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin. Mofaz strongly defended the GOI decision to kill Yassin, and said Israel would continue carrying out such operations. He accused Yassin of sending hundreds of suicide bombers to kill Israelis and called him "the Palestinians' Bin Laden." The Ambassador asked Mofaz about the impact the killing might have on PM Sharon's attempts to get Egypt to play a significant role in Gaza withdrawal. "We're going to fight Hamas, in any case," Mofaz replied, adding that Egypt even before the assassination had been interested only in low-level involvement, with no "responsibility" for Palestinian actions.

[1](#)4. (C) Sneh, while asserting that Yassin undoubtedly deserved his fate, criticized the GOI action, predicting that it would accelerate what he said was the movement of PA security force members towards the Hamas orbit. Does the GOI, he asked rhetorically, want Hamas to rule Palestine? An Islamic government, he said, would be intolerable, but the GOI is doing nothing to encourage moderate Palestinians to take over. Olmert, who, as a member of the inner Cabinet, would have helped make the decision to kill Yassin, also commented that the assassination could have a problematic impact on the future of Gaza, citing the greater difficulty the GOI would have in coordinating with the PA over security issues related to the Israeli withdrawal.

U.S. Support for Gaza Disengagement

[1](#)5. (C) Mofaz said that he gained the impression from a visit to Washington the week before that the USG favors Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan and appreciates why Israel must take unilateral action. From his own point of view, he saw the removal of settlements from Gaza improving Israel's overall security situation and giving the IDF greater flexibility. The plan, he said, preserves chances for the roadmap. He said he hoped that U.S. support would help convince GOI members currently opposed to the plan to support it.

[1](#)6. (C) Olmert focused as well on the importance of U.S. support, but averred that he did not expect the U.S. to provide financial assistance for Gaza withdrawal. The extent

of Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank under consideration was probably not enough to motivate strong U.S. support. He did predict, however, that President Bush, in a one-on-one meeting with Sharon, would ask Sharon to trust him on the question of support on the withdrawal plan and Israel's rejection of a Palestinian "right of return" until after the U.S. election.

17. (C) Sneh blasted what he called Sharon's "strategy behind the pullout," charging that Sharon's ultimate goal is to get assurances that Israel will be left alone on West Bank matters. The result of Sharon's approach, he asserted, would be a "Hamastan" in the South to go along with the "Hizballahstan" that Israel already allowed to be created in the North.

18. (C) Asked by Zakheim about the U.S. role, Sneh said the GOI could not "cynically" ask the U.S. for financial assistance. To do so would be neither "respectful" nor "dignified." For its part, Sneh continued, the U.S. should ensure that:

- There is no Hamas state in either Gaza or the West Bank;
- Israel dismantles outposts in the West Bank before proceeding with Gaza settlements;
- The separation barrier sticks "strictly" to the Green Line;
- The GOI "negotiates" with Dahlan and Gaza security figures in advance of Israeli departure from Gaza;
- The GOI does not pay "exaggerated compensation" to the 7,000 or so Gaza settlers, as this would create an impossible precedent for removing the 100,000 or so West Bank settlers whom the GOI would have to move in any agreement on the West Bank;
- The status of West Bank settlements be negotiated (Comment: Sneh did not say with whom) before any settlers are removed from Gaza.

Internal GOI Politicking on Disengagement

19. (C) Looking ahead to prospects for approval of Sharon's plan in the Cabinet, Olmert commented that Finance Minister Netanyahu's wishes were unclear, although many insiders believe that he's in favor of withdrawal from Gaza. Netanyahu does, however, appear to be worried about the U.S. position and his own prospects, as finance minister, for ending up stuck with the bill. Olmert predicted that Foreign Minister Shalom, who has not taken a position yet, would ultimately come around to Sharon's plan. He claimed that Shalom had come to realize after a recent meeting with some of his base supporters in the Yemenite Orthodox community that he could afford politically to back the PM.

110. (C) Steinetz told Zakheim that he might ultimately be able to support the withdrawal, but only if it involves Gaza only, not the West Bank. Israel, he said, could afford to take more security risks in Gaza than in the West Bank, which sits close to the most strategic places in Israel, e.g., Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion airport, and the economic centers around Tel Aviv. If the withdrawal were limited to Gaza only, he predicted, no Likud members, or virtually none, would leave the party.

Withdrawal Logistics

11. (C) Mofaz said he hoped to begin the withdrawal from Gaza at the end of the year. This would permit completion of the plan by the summer of 2005. Zakheim asked why the process will take so long. Mofaz replied that removal of the settlers, including "talking with them" and finding them new housing, would prove time-consuming. Pressed by Zakheim for a budget estimate for withdrawal, Mofaz demurred, but finally said, "Maybe a few billion shekels. I can't say if it's five or eight billion." Sneh said he had the impression that Gaza settlers would move in roughly equal proportion to the Negev, to other parts of Israel, and to West Bank settlements.

112. (C) Olmert said the GOI had no definite timetable for the withdrawal, although he thought it might begin after the U.S. election. Should President Bush lose the election, the start could be delayed.

113. (U) U/S Zakheim cleared this message.

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KURTZER